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## Dear SSHRC, What Do You Want? An Epistolary Narrative of Expertise, Identity, and Time in Grant Writing

*Michelle K. McGinn, Sandra Acker, Marie Vander Kloet & Anne Wagner*

### Key words:

research funding;  
social sciences;  
epistolary  
narrative; self-  
study; letter writing

**Abstract:** The current research climate has heightened expectations for social science researchers to secure research grant funding at the same time that such funding appears to be more competitive than ever. As a result, researchers experience anxiety, confusion, loss of confidence, second guessing, and a lack of trust in the system and themselves. This autoethnographic study provides an insider perspective on the intellectual, emotional, and physical experience of grant writing. A team of scholars document the production of a research grant for their major national funding agency, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The story is presented through epistolary narrative in the form of a series of unsent letters addressed to the funding agency. The letters foreground themes of expertise, identity, and time as they were shaped through the grant-writing process. The analysis draws attention to unnecessary complexities and challenges that could and should be eliminated from granting processes if the intention is to foster quality research and strengthen research capacity. Implications may prove instructive for other grant applicants, resource personnel employed to support applicants, and potential funders.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, our team has been examining questions around the ways social science researchers, especially those who engage in work that incorporates social justice themes, conceptualize, fund, conduct, and manage individual and collaborative research projects. Interviews from our two pilot projects suggest that the pressure to apply for external funding has increased and, given variable success rates, has added stress for already-over-stretched academics (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017; ACKER, WAGNER & MCGINN, 2018). There is a sense that the long-standing mantra of "publish or perish" is being replaced—or extended—by a new focus on "funding or famine" (QUAKE, 2009; see also MUSAMBIRA, COLLINS, BROWN & VOSS, 2012). [1]

Research granting structures are increasingly prevalent within the practice and policy environment of contemporary academe (LAMONT, 2009; LEATHWOOD & READ, 2013; MUSAMBIRA et al., 2012; SERRANO VELARDE, 2018; STRELTSOVA, 2017), including in Canada where this study is based (GOPAUL et al., 2016; MCGINN, 2012a; POLSTER, 2007). This emphasis on research grants shapes academics' identities and their approaches toward research production (KORO-LJUNGBERG, 2014; LUUKKONEN & THOMAS, 2016; PINTO, 2015; ROTH, 2002). Critics have considered many facets of the process, identifying, for instance, concerns around excessive time commitments (GORDON & POULIN, 2009; HERBERT, BARNETT, CLARKE & GRAVES, 2013; ROBINSON, 2013), hypercompetition (EDWARDS & SIDDHARTHA, 2017; MOORE, NEYLON, EVE, O'DONNELL & PATTINSON, 2017), gendered inequities (LEBERMAN, EAMES & BARNETT, 2016; REES, 2011; SIDE & ROBBINS, 2007), and the ways the fear of risk encourages narrowed research topics and approaches (HAMANN, 2016; OLSEN, 2016). Attention has been devoted to the uncertainties of peer review and its lack of transparency (JAYASINGHE, MARSH & BOND, 2001; LAMONT, 2009; MOW, 2009; ROTH, 2002, 2004; ROUMBANIS, 2017), as well as the embellishment inspired by requirements to embed anticipated practical consequences (characterized as impact or knowledge mobilization) into research grant applications (CHUBB & WATERMEYER, 2017). A few writers have attempted to convey the personal impact and emotional consequences of applying for research grants (ACKER & YLIJOKI, 2018; HERBERT, COVENEY, CLARKE, GRAVES & BARNETT, 2014; PINTO, 2015; ROTH, 2002). Others have focused upon the rhetorical practices of grant writing (SERRANO VELARDE, 2018; TSENG, 2011). [2]

Individually and collectively, our research team has been pursuing layered, qualitative "research on research/ers" (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017; ACKER et al., 2018; MCGINN, 2012a, 2012b). There are two main approaches to scholarship about academic research. One approach involves an individualistic and agentic view of academic identity and research leadership as they develop over time in a career. A second approach is a critical stance that emphasizes the simultaneous effects of external regulation and self-discipline. We follow the models of DEGN (2018), HENKEL (2010), and POLSTER (2007) to advance a middle ground that

balances individual agency, institutional surroundings, and wider social forces in understanding what knowledge production means for Canadian academics. [3]

As we launched our efforts to secure funding to extend our work, we realized that our personal experience could prove instructive to other applicants, resource personnel within their institutions, and the funding agencies. We decided to document our experiences of applying for research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Having read, considered, and researched others' ideas about the stress and strain of securing research funding, we approached the process of preparing our funding application with a high degree of reflexivity, which we anticipated would have methodological and ethical benefits for the larger research project we were proposing as has been shown in prior studies (McGINN, SHIELDS, MANLEY-CASIMIR, GRUNDY & FENTON, 2005; PHILLIPS & HALL, 2002). [4]

Our grant-writing experience complements our initial pilot interviews and the existing literature to suggest that there is a preoccupation among social science academics and research administrators in Canada with divining "what SSHRC wants." These attempts to divine the unknowable result in reification and personification of the funding agency. In conversations and documentation, SSHRC is treated as if it were a singular entity or actor rather than a dense network of intertwined actors (ROTH, 2002). As our experience confirms, there is a sense of SSHRC as an opaque "black box" wherein the adjudication process is hidden from the view of applicants and allows no recourse (MOW, 2009; ROTH, 2002). We suggest that the lack of transparency and the inability to intervene in adjudication decisions leads to anxiety, confusion, loss of confidence, second guessing, and distrust in the system and one's self. Based upon evident similarities with existing accounts of the personal toll of grant writing (HERBERT et al., 2014; PINTO, 2015), we expect that our experience with this research grant program is not unlike what others have encountered when applying to SSHRC and comparable funding agencies. [5]

## **2. Funding a Social Science Research Project in Canada**

Members of our team came together shortly after the project leader submitted a preliminary funding request in March 2015 to her Associate Dean's Office to support two pilot studies related to social scientists' experiences as research project managers and leaders. The two pilot studies allowed us to conduct a series of interviews with Canadian and international scholars about their research experiences (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017; ACKER et al., 2018). Preliminary evidence from those interviews prompted us to pursue funding for a larger study involving an expanded research team. [6]

As scholars based in Canada, we immediately identified SSHRC as a potential source of funding. SSHRC is the major funding body, or more evocatively, "the lifeblood of humanities and social science research in Canada" (DINEEN, 2007, p.3). Currently, three major programs support research and researcher development: "Talent" provides direct support for master's, doctoral, and

postdoctoral scholars to develop their research and professional skills; "Connection" is all about knowledge mobilization and partnership; and "Insight" includes several funding opportunities for investigator-driven research led by scholars affiliated with Canadian postsecondary institutions. The flagship Insight Grant fund was our targeted focus. [7]

The annual Insight Grant competition adopts a peer-review process to allocate funding in the range of \$7,000 to \$400,000 CAD over 2 to 5 years. Applicants select one of around 23 adjudication committees to which their proposal will be directed. These adjudication committees may be based on a single discipline (e.g., philosophy) or combine several disciplines (e.g., "sociology, demography and related fields"). Each adjudication committee typically has 7 to 9 members, usually scholars drawn from Canadian universities. Names of adjudication committee members are revealed after the competitions. Committee composition suggests there may be some effort to balance regional representation and institutional size, although the only criterion listed, apart from expertise, is "normally" an ability to read in the two official languages: English and French. [8]

As well as selecting an adjudication committee, applicants can list three potential reviewers, although there is no guarantee that those individuals will be asked or available to provide assessments. SSHRC's Program Officers try to find several external assessors for each submitted proposal. These assessors, who may be Canadian or international, provide ratings and qualitative comments on a list of set criteria under headings of challenge (the strength of the proposal), capability (qualifications and track record of applicants), and feasibility (probability of a successful outcome, including appropriateness of the budget). Two adjudication committee members read the proposal (and the assessments) and rate the application on the same criteria used by the assessors. These committee members present their views to the full committee, which discusses cases where the outcome is unclear and makes final adjudication decisions. Adjudication committees are empowered to cut budgets of approved proposals. Unlike in some other countries, there is no higher level of adjudication or government input into these decisions. [9]

We could see that the 2015-2016 competition, the most recent at the time of our application in October 2016, had a 23.4% success rate with funding provided for 466 of 1,991 applications received (SSHRC, 2018a). The average size grant awarded that year was \$175,741 CAD, which represents 87.6% of the funds requested for those applications. That is, even successful applicants can expect some reduction in their budgets. (As a result of several changes in practice, success rates have risen steadily in the subsequent two competitions to 31.1% and 40.0% but with smaller average grants that represent smaller portions of the funding requested in those successful applications; see SSHRC, 2018a.) Funding is provided to teams of varying sizes: In the 2015-2016 competition, 40.6% of funded applications involved an individual researcher while 3 projects involved 15 or more researchers (ibid.). Success rates were comparable regardless of team size with no statistical difference between observed and expected success rates for applications from individual researchers, small teams of 2 or 3 researchers,

mid-size teams of 4 to 9 researchers, and large teams of 10 or more researchers,  $\chi^2(3)=1.60, p=.66$ . [10]

Each application to the Insight Grant program names a principal investigator who "has primary responsibility for the intellectual direction of the research or research-related activity, and assumes administrative responsibility for the grant" (SSHRC, 2018b, §3). Applications may also involve co-applicants who are considered co-investigators and are expected to play significant roles in the research and may assume administrative responsibility for aspects of the work. Some projects also include collaborators who may adopt roles similar to co-investigators but face restrictions on the expenses they may claim with respect to the project. The principal investigator and any co-applicants must be affiliated with Canadian postsecondary institutions, but there is no such requirement for collaborators. In our case, the principal investigator was joined by 3 co-applicants and 3 collaborators (one in a professional staff role at a Canadian university and two in academic positions at international universities); all seven researchers hold earned doctorates. We thought that the size and combination of expertise within this mid-sized team would provide a competitive application. [11]

We started drafting plans for the extended project in July 2016, which gave us three months before the SSHRC Insight Grant deadline in October 2016. We worked diligently through multiple drafts and countless e-mail messages, plus one additional face-to-face meeting for the Canadian team members in early September 2016. In the week leading up to the deadline, we finalized and submitted our application for a project entitled "Academic Researchers in Challenging Times." The proposed project was designed to enrich understandings of research as a social production through qualitative interviews with academics, doctoral students, and research administrators and an analysis of relevant institutional and provincial policies. This article documents the story of the production of this research grant over that intensive 3-month period. [12]

### **3. Epistolary Narrative as Autoethnographic Method**

This collaborative self-study (McGINN et al., 2005; McINTYRE & COLE, 2001) is informed by the emphasis in autoethnography on researchers analyzing their personal experiences in relation to society and culture (CHANG, 2008; ELLIS, 2004). Our intent in this article is to describe our sensemaking (DEGN, 2018) as we prepared our SSHRC application. In order to convey the extent of the grant-writing task, we kept track of drafts of sections, feedback received, and quantity and substance of e-mails between and among our research team and the various resource personnel with whom we connected. Our focus turned toward recording reflections about the various forms of advice we received and our interpretations about what SSHRC does and does not want, or what was perceived to be favored or unflavored in research grant applications. [13]

Our efforts were informed by the following guiding research questions: How do Canadian social science researchers with social justice commitments experience research grant writing? What are the intellectual and emotional consequences of

efforts to secure research grant funding? What messages do we as researchers have for funders and for other grant applicants? [14]

As we contemplated our experiences and the accumulating data corpus, we felt an overwhelming urge to communicate our understandings and analysis to our desired funder. This impetus led us toward epistolary narrative (TAMBOUKOU, 2011) as a means to capture our experiences. We wrote individual letters to SSHRC from our various positions as principal investigator, co-applicants, and collaborators, framing our intentions and our concerns with advice, strategies, and requirements (real or imagined) related to the SSHRC application process. After collective review, we prepared a final set of these letters in response to the guiding research questions, drawing particular attention to the major themes of expertise, identity, and time. Unlike ROTH (2004), we have not sent these letters to SSHRC; instead, we used the letter-writing process as a way to document our perceptions based upon our direct experience in preparing the grant application and informed by the stories captured in our pilot interviews and in the existing literature. [15]

Within the field of higher education, other scholars have used letters and letter writing in various ways, including analyzing pre-existing letters as data sources (DAVIS & HARRIS, 2015), inviting research participants to construct letters to be used as data sources (MUNDAY, 2016), composing composite letters during analysis of data gathered through interviews (MANANKIL-RANKIN, 2016), or inviting participants to write letters in response to composite letters constructed from interview data (ENRIGHT, RYNEE & ALFREY, 2017). Similar to CHANNA (2017) and consistent with autoethnography (CHANG, 2008; ELLIS, 2004), our letter writing was an important means for us to reflect upon higher education practice, deconstruct our experiences, and critique the system within which we work. As a typically private form of communication, letters are well suited to communicating inner thoughts and emotions (CARROLL, 2015) related to grant-writing practice. In this article, we reach out to other grant writers and potential funders by presenting a collection of our letters in full, exploring considerations around expertise, advice, technical requirements, identities, international collaboration, student roles, and commitments to research. [16]

## 4. Letters to the Funding Agency

### 4.1 Expertise and experience lost in all those drafts

Dear SSHRC,

You probably know that applicants spend a great deal of time working on proposals, and so they should, if public money is to be spent wisely, right? But how much time is too much, especially when many projects won't be funded and time spent is not normally credited as workload? Let me tell you about the time I spent writing an Insight Grant proposal, which is a topic I've also written about in ACKER and YLIJOKI (2018). [17]

More than a year before starting to write the proposal, I devised two pilot projects, put together a research team, and worked with a graduate assistant on a bibliography. Team members—from 4 universities—came to seven meetings on their own time and at their own cost. [18]

Serious writing began mid-July 2016 and continued uninterrupted until October 7, the day of submission. The writing process often felt artificial due to the requirement to write segments of particular lengths to fit pre-specified headings and categories. I spent more than 300 hours during that almost three-month period and that estimate does not count preparatory work before we officially launched our writing or the time of the co-applicants, collaborators, and resource personnel with whom I worked. We drafted and redrafted sections repeatedly. Table 1 identifies the number of drafts for each section of the grant application saved to my computer. Other team members have additional interim drafts on their computers, so this list is only a partial representation of the texts produced by the team.

Grant section	Number of drafts
Budget	29
CVs and publication lists	21
Expected outcomes and benefits	11
Knowledge mobilization plan	16
Main proposal or sections thereof	48
References	16
Research contributions	18
Team, previous output, and student training	26
One-page summary	21

Table 1: Number of drafts of the different grant sections on the principal investigator's computer [19]



The summer was entirely devoted to writing, with few breaks, no holiday, and little attention paid to family or other work or leisure (HERBERT et al., 2013, 2014). [20]

Specific items seemed like turning points. One was an incident at a "SSHRC Boot Camp" facilitated in September 2016 by research administrators at my Faculty. We were asked to bring our one-page (or more precisely 3800-character) summary for discussion and critique. At the time, I had not yet written this segment, so I prepared something the night before that seemed to me to be presentable. At the event, one of the research administrators critiqued this draft. She explained that the one-page summary needed to convey a sense of urgency, raise critical questions, make a compelling case for why I should be funded rather than someone else, stress the potential to transform theory/policy/practice, and show benefit and impact beyond academe. [21]

I had imagined I knew how to write a summary after over 40 years as an academic and a history of funded SSHRC grant applications, so this incident was a challenge to my self-confidence and an indicator of how expectations had changed. I began to realize how seriously SSHRC success was being taken by my Faculty. In addition to workshops, we were offered collegial peer review, the services of an editor, help with the budget, and examples of successful past proposals. I wondered: How many of these supports are available at less research-intensive or smaller universities (LAUDEL, 2006)? [22]

Another area of difficulty was the budget and the two-page budget justification. The budget had become professionalized: I needed the help of an experienced research administrator, with whom I exchanged some 100 e-mails, most of which seemed to focus on the question "What does SSHRC *not* want?" SSHRC instructions warned that an inflated budget would bring cuts or rejection and stressed that one criterion for evaluation would be the budget's conformity to a curious concept of "minimum essential funding" (SSHRC, 2018c, Evaluation and Adjudication, §1). [23]

I had worried particularly about the knowledge mobilization section as this requirement had been added since my prior applications. I printed out the knowledge mobilization sections in each of the sample funded applications available from my Faculty. These statements were all rather similar. With the assistance of one of my team members with more experience in the area, I thought the section we eventually prepared turned out rather well. [24]

Doing this work was surprisingly emotional. I was energized by the interactions with team members, the research administrators, and the editor. Sometimes when I was writing I was able to get into the mode of what Oili-Helena YLIJOKI, one of our international collaborators, calls "timeless time" (YLIJOKI, 2015; YLIJOKI & MÄNTYLÄ, 2003; see also VOSTAL, 2016) when immersion took over. On the other hand, with so many hours at the computer, often my neck, shoulders, and legs ached, my eyes became painfully dry, and I suffered from anxiety and insomnia. I was obsessed with detail and fearful of making a mistake

that would be a fatal flaw. I mused that, ironically, being retired was key to me finding enough time for the required effort. [25]

SSHRC, can we simplify the expectations, cut unnecessary detail, give more space when needed, re-think what is "minimum essential funding"? Isn't the point to do good research, not just pare the cost to the bone?

Sincerely,

The Principal Investigator [26]

## 4.2 Uncertainty and advice

Dear SSHRC,

We applied for our first Insight Grant. Our previous applications to the old Standard Research Grants program did not emphasize knowledge mobilization, expected outcomes, and open-access publishing, and we did not have to choose how many years of funding to request. When these changes appeared in 2012, success rates plummeted. We heard the glum advice to prepare for a "culture of resubmission." Our pilot interviews indicated this culture of resubmission had become a reality. We fretted that we would face this fate. [27]

We wrote in an atmosphere of uncertainty. The problem was that no one really knows what "SSHRC wants." We rely upon myths, hearsay, guesses, and gossip. Research administrators and academics alike circulate stories about what has been successful (or not). We were inundated with advice. We were immensely grateful for these gifts, yet overwhelmed and uncertain about which advice to heed. [28]

Is it true, SSHRC, that you won't fund conference attendance in the early grant years? Is overseas travel too daring a proposition? Why shouldn't we hire a postdoctoral fellow when so many doctoral graduates (many trained in SSHRC projects) are seeking employment that uses their skills? What's wrong with scheduling a writing retreat to protect multiple days for writing? And what if we really do need those file folders we were told not to include in the budget? [29]

The argument against early conference travel is that researchers need time to produce presentable results. We were advised that it would be safer to put conference travel into the third, or even better, the fourth year of our project. But our study builds upon two substantial preliminary studies that would benefit from input and networking. Conference travel is key to knowledge mobilization and dissemination to international audiences, so deferring seems counterproductive. [30]

As for the advice to avoid the term "retreat" in our application, I have witnessed the productivity that arises from focused time during residential writing retreats. I know the research base about writing strategies and interventions for academics, and retreats feature prominently as effective strategies (e.g., KORNHABER, CROSS, BETIHAVAS & BRIDGMAN, 2016; McGRAIL, RICKARD & JONES,

2006). We could, I suppose, use a different term and proceed somewhat subversively with our plan, but shouldn't we use what we know? [31]

In writing our application, I wish I could say with confidence that we trusted our own expertise, rather than trying to conform to some ghostly template of "what SSHRC wants."

Respectfully yours,

A Co-Applicant [32]

### 4.3 Technical wizardry

Dear SSHRC,

In preparing our application, I became the detail person and copyeditor. Getting the details right felt daunting. The number of words we wrote and rewrote was astounding. Any change in one section had ripple effects across other sections, and we had to check carefully to avoid any inconsistencies. When we added or removed research components or shifted items from one budget year to another, we had to ensure the proposal, the budget, the description of student training, the knowledge mobilization plan, and all other sections were aligned. [33]

Team members had different style preferences but coherence demanded a consistent style. Should we or should we not use serial commas? How about digital object identifiers (DOIs)? The principal investigator declared me the "technical wizard" because I could put asterisks in the margins next to SSHRC-funded entries on our respective CVs. I also intervened when a team member wanted to change her CV after she had uploaded it. I explained the multiple complex steps in an e-mail to the principal investigator:

"To make changes in the online part of the CV, I think she will need to first go to the CV module in her portal to make the edits, then verify the CV. To make changes to the research contributions attachment, she will need to go to the Accepted Invitations section, then click to open the invitation and go to the Research Contributions tab, where she can delete the existing file and then upload the revised PDF file. After which, she will need to return to her Portfolio to Verify and Refresh the CV. The Preview icon should then let her see the complete document with the online components and this attachment all compiled into one pdf. Likewise, at that point, it should be reattached to the application, so you can see the final version" (September 27, 2016, at 10:13 a.m.). [34]

My e-mailed instructions were conveyed to the other team member and she was able to make the desired changes, but I'm left wondering if there might be better ways to focus our energies as scholars. SSHRC, do you think that being able to navigate a complex online system is an appropriate measure of research potential? If applicants need technical support to navigate such systems, do they have access to institutional personnel or funding to hire someone?

Sincerely,

The Technical Wizard, a Co-Applicant [35]

#### 4.4 Definitional quandaries and identity

Dear SSHRC,

What is it that you are looking for in a collaborator? I have read the definitions of collaborator and co-applicant (SSHRC, 2018b) multiple times and have concluded that you want permanent academic staff to govern your grants and that the work of collaborators will be voluntary. [36]

What distinguishes me from the other team members is not my relative inexperience as a researcher or my doctorate but my employment status. I work in the alt-ac (as it is known on Twitter and in publications such as *University Affairs* and *Inside Higher Education*; see BETHMAN & LONGSTREET, 2013; BOWNESS, 2015) or "staff land" (as I call it). You have specified that I must be affiliated with an eligible Canadian postsecondary institution to be a co-applicant, so shouldn't my full-time, continuing appointment at a research university count? I am clearly affiliated but apparently not in an appropriate way. My institution has determined that I am not a viable principal investigator or co-applicant because of my position. This judgment has resurfaced doubts about my work that I have wrestled with for the last 7 years: Am I still a researcher if this application designates me a collaborator? For collaborators, research appears to be a type of hobby. Our expertise and knowledge are assets that SSHRC can make use of (but for which we are not to be compensated). [37]

But, oh SSHRC, something might be stewing in the academy. You see, staff land is full of people like me—people with doctorates (and with publications, and experience writing grants and conducting research) and some of us are sitting down yearly with academics to support them as they apply for SSHRC grants. I doubt that the growing number of PhDs working in staff land were the imagined collaborators. We are, of course, the result of an oversupplied pool of PhD graduates and a restructured workforce at Canadian universities. Some days, academic positions might seem as prestigious as SSHRC makes out. But I have often wondered if academic jobs are really very good anymore—a feeling that I anticipate will grow for me if SSHRC funds this project. [38]

Although my tone might suggest that I doubt the institutional decision to preclude me as a co-applicant, that is not entirely a fair portrayal of my thinking. I don't have the same academic freedoms as academic staff and my research is often connected to my job or a mode of professional development (whereby I demonstrate myself as a scholarly ally but not peer to academics). The consequences of this situation for research are important—research I lead could be influenced by the politics and practices of my workplace and supervisor. This constraint has meant that scholarly work that is not approved by my workplace is done on my own time and cannot be presented with my institutional affiliation. I have not yet figured out where this project will land; I suspect it will be a

combination of hobby and work. SSHRC, I doubt you would see collaborators as research hobbyists but perhaps that is at least one of the best ways to think about who I am.

Sincerely,

A Collaborator [39]

#### **4.5 Barriers to international collaboration**

Dear SSHRC,

We are puzzled by the impediments we found to international collaboration. In the 2016-2020 SSHRC Strategic Plan, *Advancing Knowledge for Canada's Future*, there is a commitment to such work: "SSHRC will build new, strategic and promising opportunities for Canadian research, training and knowledge mobilization, through joint funding and other collaborative initiatives with funders and stakeholder organizations, in Canada and abroad" (SSHRC, 2016, p.13). This objective underpins the desire that "Canada maintains and enhances its globally competitive position as a producer of high-calibre research, embracing new and diverse forms of research excellence" (p.10). [40]

When we first planned our project, we brainstormed exciting ideas in which we would work with international collaborators in the UK and Finland, and possibly elsewhere, to produce parallel research that would allow us to compare different systems of research funding and norms around research production. We intended to present at international conferences that would bring our research to the attention of a global audience. We hoped to bring our student research assistants with us as part of their training. [41]

All of these plans were sacrificed on the altar of minimum essential funding and were thwarted in other small but important ways. For example, our international colleagues could not be principal investigators or co-applicants, could not receive sub-grants, and thus would have little incentive to be involved more than peripherally in the project. We doubt their institutions would recognize being a SSHRC collaborator as carrying sufficient prestige or resources to encourage our colleagues to allocate time for teamwork with us. In contrast, our colleague applying to the Academy of Finland must include a "mobility plan" in which she describes travel outside Finland for her as the lead researcher and travel to Finland for international colleagues that she will invite as visiting scholars (ACKER & YLIJOKI, 2018). [42]

Your requirement for open-access publications also introduces challenges that might discourage international colleagues. For our colleague in Finland, publishing in top-tier journals has a direct effect on a portion of the government funding allocated to her university (ibid.). In our field of higher education, several top journals are published by Taylor & Francis, which charges about \$3,000 USD for open access to avoid the embargo periods that prevent us from uploading to our institutional repository for 18 months, which is too long to meet your

requirements. We were allowed to include fees for this purpose in our proposal, but we worried about creating a too-large budget, and we believed that limited funds could be better spent than by enriching publishers. [43]

In practice, our international collaborators have been generous with their time and advice, and we still hope to generate some comparative research, although funding for such a purpose remains elusive. But how can Canada be "a global leader in humanities and social sciences research and research training" (SSHRC, 2016, p.9) without more support and encouragement for working, researching, and traveling abroad?

Sincerely,

The Principal Investigator [44]

#### **4.6 Learning experiences for student assistants**

Dear SSHRC,

Consistent with your focus, we see student training as an essential element of our project. We envisioned multiple rich opportunities for students to be engaged, working alongside us as the project unfolds. Depending upon when and where they join the project, students would have opportunities to learn specific skills such as bibliographic searching, navigating websites to identify potential participants or relevant policy documents, securing ethics clearance, designing interviews, coding and analyzing qualitative data, and writing and presenting research. These are skills they can use to complete their current or future degrees and to pursue research-related employment. Furthermore, working with a team is a professional skill that could assist them in academic and non-academic careers. We know that working as a research assistant is an important learning opportunity for students and a major contribution to the next generation of scholars (MAHER, GILMORE, FELDON & DAVIS, 2013; MCGINN, 2015). [45]

Despite these positives for engaging student assistants, we have struggled to provide a balanced budget with full justification for each expense. Students need training and supervision to achieve the potential gains from these learning opportunities. We know from experience that the hours can add up quickly. It is time-intensive work. We hope you will recognize the importance of allocating substantial time to ensure research quality and provide rich experiences for student assistants. Such opportunities are a key mechanism for advancing research and research training.

Sincerely,

A Co-Applicant [46]

#### 4.7 Research team or application team?

Dear SSHRC,

I joined the team after some members with connections to the principal investigator were already there, and I'm still not sure how we can come together to do the intellectual work. I am curious about this team, most of whom I do not know well yet. What matters most to them about this work? How does this project connect with other aspects of their lives and their research? What tensions exist within the group? As the application deadline loomed, my and our attention quickly shifted from intellectual exchanges and the pilot projects to reading about how to apply to SSHRC. I went from thinking about this experience as a research project to regarding it as an application process. [47]

Our time together, real and virtual, was precisely focused on the application. We poured over SSHRC guidelines and web materials, as well as institutional resources. We talked through each step, stage, document, and communication to try to ascertain what information was being sought and what the language meant. We waded through gossip and expert advice. We did all of this work in the hope that the project would be fundable and that we would eventually have a project that we recognized and still interested us. [48]

The application process drew me back to graduate school SSHRC ordeals—trying earnestly to decipher the meaning from SSHRC communications and instructions and listening with one ear to the advice of campus experts—in order to write something worthy of funding. The process of trying to imagine this project into a form that would be desirable by SSHRC felt at times achingly similar and equally unsatisfying. [49]

I recall the feelings of urgency and necessity: Funding is needed! Funding will ensure the work means something! With funding, I/we will be recognizable as particular kinds of scholars! But, dear SSHRC, applications and funding just don't mean the same thing to me now as they did in graduate school. I am not sure what it will mean for each member of our team. But reading the interview transcripts from the pilot projects suggests we have a mess of emotions, analyses, and critiques about being researchers. I anticipate we will continue to untangle these considerations as we wait to hear what you, SSHRC, want and as we continue to occupy that unstable, and at times uncomfortable, place of researcher and researched.

Sincerely,

A Team Member [50]

#### 4.8 Commentary

Dear SSHRC,

We hope you have heard us. We are immensely grateful for the support you provide for social science and humanities research in Canada. But the process of applying for funding is too much like an endurance test or a guessing game. It requires considerable time, commitment, teamwork, planning, and sacrifice, undertaken with the knowledge that the result may be nothing but frustration. Too many sources of difficulty are still in the system, requiring patience, technical wizardry, and huge amounts of time to overcome. [51]

The most challenging aspect for us was the uncertainty. First, there is the selection of the appropriate committee. Around us people heatedly discussed whether it was safer, or better, to apply to a disciplinary committee like Sociology, or a specifically multidisciplinary one for projects that crossed disciplines, or go for the wide-ranging Education and Social Work. They debated whether it was helpful or catastrophic to fill in the page specifying what had been changed since a previous unsuccessful application (not our issue at the time). Should a good external reviewer who is cited multiple times in the proposal be strategically left off the suggested reviewer list in hopes they will then be contacted for an assessment? And how do we comprehend the cases of colleagues who claim they changed almost nothing from an unsuccessful submission in one year to a successful one the next year (in one case, going from a rejection to "number one"). In general, everyone was trying to anticipate what would attract the most favor from an adjudication committee, while avoiding any pitfalls that could give an adjudication committee a reason to reject a proposal. We, like other applicants, are propelled into the ether in which assumptions about "what SSHRC wants" arise and grow and transform. [52]

Hearing that even a small misstep—such as selecting the wrong adjudication committee or asking too early in the project for conference funding or writing an unexciting summary page—is enough to doom an application makes it important to find alternative sources of motivation. Those sources might be external, such as departmental assessments of our "productivity." Motivation may also be internal as we have a thirst for the discovery of knowledge. [53]

Our efforts take place with the recognition that even if we are chosen, minimum essential funding may not enable us to make our intended contributions. Could the process of applying for a SSHRC Insight Grant be more humane? Is it only a matter of the government allocating more money to SSHRC? If there is never enough money, then spreading smaller amounts across more applicants may seem a better strategy, but what do reduced budgets do to the quality of research that can be produced? How do these decisions affect Canada's place in the social science research world? Is it possible to alter the emphasis so that time and attention goes to doing research rather than to writing grant applications? We would like to think that "what SSHRC wants" is excellent scholarship, however



defined, but that focus sometimes gets lost in the black box of grant application and adjudication.

Sincerely,

The Research Team [54]

## **5. Underlying Themes and Significance of the Work**

These letters foreground themes of expertise, identity, and time as we experienced them through the grant-writing process. We point to the role of "tips" and inside information, the rise of professional assistance (e.g., budget writers, editors), the place of student training, technological anxieties, and the devil in the details. Through our letters, we question the ways various forms of expertise and experience are or are not valued in the process, and we identify unnecessary complexities and challenges that could and should be eliminated. [55]

Through this reflexive approach to grant writing, we illuminate the experience and consequences of the emphasis on grant getting for Canadian social science researchers. Like the researchers we have interviewed in our pilot projects (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017; ACKER et al., 2018), we personally face the challenges of undertaking research in the contemporary academic climate. Preparing the SSHRC application had intellectual, emotional, financial, and even physical consequences for us, and it heightened our sensitivity to what ROTH (2002, 2004) called the "vagaries and politics of funding." [56]

The current research climate has raised expectations for social science researchers to secure research grant funding at the same time that such funding is deemed to be more competitive than ever, which has led to negative emotions and undermined confidence in one's self and in the system. The complexities for scholars with social justice commitments are particularly prominent. Intensified pressures around funding prompt a state of hypercompetition, which is perceived as antithetical to social justice and feminist values (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017). In countries that rely on contract researchers to conduct social science research, there are many issues around the precarity of those positions. For SSHRC projects, we are discouraged from hiring research assistants other than students, which allows valuable opportunities to build skills for students, including those from under-represented groups; yet dependence on students alone can also create problems of continuity and investment in the research (ACKER & WAGNER, 2017; ACKER et al., 2018). [57]

Six key points underline the significance of this topic for higher education. First, we argue that the emphasis on divining "what does SSHRC want" reifies and personifies the research council (ROTH, 2002) and contributes to the anxiety and confusion scholars face. Yet to write these letters, we had to (temporarily) adopt the same problematic image of "SSHRC." Second, our account indirectly highlights the under-explored impacts of focusing on "grant getting" rather than "grant having" (McCARTHY VANOOSTEN, 2008). The emphasis on securing research funding in some paradoxical ways seems to detract from the research

itself, for it seems that higher value is often attached to the acquisition of grant funding than to the quality of the research undertaken or the knowledge generated with that funding (McGINN, 2012b). Third, our letters connect to and extend beyond the existing literature and provide a human element to the challenges of "playing the research game" (LUCAS, 2006). We bring into focus key challenges within the current funding climate from a personal, insider perspective. Fourth, this insider perspective adds new clarity to the experience of becoming entangled in "project time," an artificial creation that may bear little resemblance to actual "process time" (YLIJOKI, 2015). Fifth, our decision to be reflexive in our work is intended to have methodological and ethical benefits for the overall research project. Documenting our reflections highlights the kinds of issues we will be discussing with researchers and with research support personnel. As researchers speaking to researchers, our insider perspective will be helpful, as McGINN et al. (2005) articulated. The situation may be somewhat different when we interview research support personnel and other key informants, however, since there is the unintended possibility that our reflections could be considered a critique of their working practices and messaging, so we will need to proceed with care in the interviews and in our resulting analyses and publications. Finally, this article provides a contribution to the small set of qualitative studies that adopt epistolary forms (CARROLL, 2015; CHANNA, 2017). Letters are personal and emotion laden. They provide voice for letter writers, and they speak directly to a named recipient. As such, letters provide a rich and relevant form for communicating qualitative research, including autoethnographic work. [58]

## 6. Postscript

### 6.1 The notification

Dear [Principal Investigator]:

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has completed the merit review of the applications submitted to the October 2016 Insight Grant competition. I am pleased to inform you that SSHRC is offering a grant for the abovementioned application. [59]

SSHRC's decision rests upon the recommendation of the selection committee, which assessed the applications on the basis of the established evaluation criteria in accordance with their relative merit. [60]

Also included as part of this result package are the following documents:

- *A Notice of Award* which contains award details including Terms and Conditions;
- *A Notice of Decision* which provides application, committee and overall competition results;
- The *external assessment memo*;

- All *external assessments* received;
- The *committee evaluation form* (where applicable). [61]

Your institution has also been informed of the standing (sextile) of your application in relation to the other applications submitted to the competition. [62]

Award holders and universities are asked to refrain from making announcements on their awards until the official public announcement has occurred. This does not prevent awardees from confidentiality sharing information about funding with their family, research team and partners, supervisor or director; or, from referring to their funding in applications for other funding. Visit the Competition Results page on SSHRC's website for details regarding the official announcement. [63]

As a federal agency, SSHRC is responsible for demonstrating to Canadians the value and contributions of social sciences and humanities research in our society. As a recipient of SSHRC funding, you have an important role to play in communicating your research with others both within the research community and across society. In this regard, we request that you acknowledge the financial support received from SSHRC in all forms of communication. Additional information pertaining to this regulation is available on the Acknowledging SSHRC page of its website. ... [64]

Please accept my warmest congratulations on your success in this competition and my very best wishes for a productive period of research activity.

Sincerely,

Tim Wilson, PhD

Executive Director

Research Grants and Partnerships Division, SSHRC [65]

## 6.2 A potential response

Dear Dr. Wilson,

Thank you for your letter dated May 5, 2017, which provides elaboration of the notice we received on March 31, 2017. We are delighted to accept funding to pursue our research. In the current context, doing research has come to mean much more than simply putting good ideas into practice, yet there is very little empirical evidence to document how researchers experience the current context and how it can undermine their scholarly efforts and their sense of themselves as scholars. Your financial support will help us to ensure Canada is recognized in the emerging field of research on research/ers. [66]

"The committee recommended that this meritorious proposal be funded at a reduced level." The stark one-line committee decision accompanying your letter gives us pause. The funding awarded is 70% of the amount we requested. The documentation provides no indication of how the committee expects us to do the research with this level of funding. As you will no doubt understand, this severe

budget cut means that we will not be able to undertake the project originally envisioned. With so much less money, we cannot do everything we planned to do. We therefore faced more work to define a smaller project to fit the smaller budget. Our original vision included documentary analysis, interviews with research administrators and other key informants, interviews with social science academics, and focus groups with graduate students. After considerable agonizing, we determined that the only way to accommodate such a large cut in the budget was to eliminate the component in which student research assistants would conduct focus group interviews with other students working on investigator-led research projects. As a result, we will not hear student voices and, perhaps most disheartening, we fear that there will be fewer opportunities for students to take leadership roles within our research team. Student assistants will not learn as much as they might have if full funding (which was already pared to what we considered essentials) had been provided. [67]

Nonetheless, we are forging ahead with the main focus of our project, with students assisting in every phase. We are uncovering solid evidence about the ways social science academics, especially those with social justice interests, experience the research production process, including applying for funding, setting up teams, accessing resources, collaborating, and leading. We were already in the midst of documenting the experience of applying for funding when we received your letter. Importantly, from our efforts to date, we have learned that SSHRC's own processes contribute to unnecessary anxieties and undermine self-confidence for scholars. All the fussy details and second guessing disrupt rather than support research and research capacity building. Even with the positive news of partial funding success, we were forced to confront continuing questions about what it is that SSHRC really does want. [68]

As part of our knowledge mobilization plan, we pledged that our work would contribute to improved policy and practices across Canada. We are therefore sharing with you our analysis of the SSHRC application process and how it impacts upon the everyday efforts and emotions of applicants. We understand that several SSHRC staff members attended to ROTH's (2002) published critique of your adjudication process (ROTH, 2004). We hope our work will similarly draw attention in your office and that together such analyses will prompt improvements in your operations. We do appreciate that SSHRC is constantly reviewing its own policies and making efforts to improve them with every grant cycle. [69]

SSHRC must work hand in hand with scholars to ensure continued vitality and to maintain "the lifeblood of humanities and social science research in Canada" (DINEEN, 2007, p.3).

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

The Academic Researchers in Challenging Times Research Team [70]

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